

INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST REVIEW

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With an Introduction by

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Introduction

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Introduction

The reprinting in its entirety of the *International Socialist Review* is welcome for many reasons. Some are more obvious than others. Socialist and other radical movements have had a presence and an influence in other periods of United States history, but most historians agree that the Golden Age of American socialism was in those years spanned by the reelection of William McKinley in 1900 and the triumph of Warren G. Harding in 1920. That the Golden Age fell between two such symbols is an irony deserving little comment. In recent years, historians and others have quarreled vigorously over the causes and the precise timing of the decline of this Golden Age, but few have called the period itself into question.¹ The *International Socialist Review* thrived through most of this period, and for all of its difficulties it was one of the few Socialist journals to span almost the entire era. Readers can judge its content and measure its historical significance for themselves. This brief introduction, however, may prove helpful to persons preparing afresh to pour over its pages.

Some biographical facts and statistics are helpful. A ten-cent monthly magazine published by Charles Kerr, a Chicago Socialist publisher (and himself the son of a University of Wisconsin professor of Greek), the *Review* survived from 1900 to 1918. Algie M. Simons, a prominent Socialist intellectual and later the author of *Social Forces in American History* (New York, 1911), a significant and pioneering if quite narrow "economic" interpretation of American history, was its first editor and held that position until 1908. In these early years, the *Review* was filled with countless theoretical articles by American and European Socialists and reflected the rather moderate social-democratic perspective of Simons and other Socialists of the "center." Soon after its first issue, the *Review* had a circulation of four thousand, three-quarters of its readers being regular mail subscribers.

The developing divisions within the socialist movement—factional splits over policies of all kinds that formed into shifting and complex "right," "left," and "center" groupings—affected the magazine, its editor, and its publisher. Editor Simons grew more "cautious" as publisher Kerr shifted to the "left." A conflict between them proved inevitable. Simons quit his post in 1908. After editing the magazine for a brief time, Kerr turned it over to Mary and Leslie Marcy. Mary was the more interesting of the two new editors. Her husband earned his reputation as a journalist, but Mary Marcy was better known. A few years before, she had worked as a private secretary to a major Chicago meat packer, and at a time of great controversy over the "beef trust," she published the *Letters of a Pork Packer's Stenographer*. Not nearly as successful as Upton Sinclair's still unpublished *The Jungle* was to be, her work nevertheless gained Mary Marcy some reputation as a muckraker.

Under its new editors, the *Review* shifted its political orientation sharply toward the "left." It thrived and became the major organ of those Socialists critical of "reformism." Within a year, circulation increased three hundred per cent. By July, 1910, the monthly had 27,000 readers. Soon, its format took on the shape of a popular magazine, and theoretical matters aside, it published some of the most graphic accounts of the bitter industrial conflicts of that era. Paterson silk workers, Lawrence woolen workers, Louisiana timber laborers, Great Plains farm hands, Mesabi range miners—these among others—found their memorable conflicts recorded in the pages of the *Review*. In 1911, a more popular magazine—and a better written one—claimed more than forty thousand readers.²

The *Review* was not without its Socialist critics. After 1908, moderate Socialists such as John Spargo complained of "the pernicious influence of the Interna-

tional Socialist Review." Robert Hunter was even more severe and penned a bitter characterization in 1911: "It has sneered at Political Action, advocated rival unionism, and vacillated between Anarchism and Proudhonism. The constant emphasis THE REVIEW lays on Direct Action and its apparent faith that a revolution can be evoked by Will or Force is in direct opposition to our whole philosophy." Worried over its seeming influence, Hunter and others like him even forced an official party investigation of Kerr and his varied publishing enterprises. Although the probe fizzled in its political intent, it did reveal that the ten or fifteen *Review* employees worked an eight-hour day, received time-and-a-half for overtime, and even a week's vacation with pay.³

What matters in these brief facts is the simple recognition that the *Review* was hardly a neutral Socialist journal but rather a magazine with a distinct but changing point of view and therefore the object of much controversy within the Socialist movement itself. Its pages tell much of the depth of the many controversies that divided the Socialist movement in its greatest years. We learn a good deal from it about the conflicts among Socialists over immediate reform as opposed to a more revolutionary strategy. The struggle over a more flexible doctrine is detailed to excess, and there is much in the journal on the dispute over Socialist relations to the American Federation of Labor and the frequent but faulted efforts in that time to spark industrial unions, syndicalist organizations, and "dual unions." Not one of these issues was trivial to Socialists of that time, and yet it is altogether foolish to welcome the *Review* simply because it allows us to renew our acquaintance with the factionalism and disputes of a past era. "Most of all," David A. Shannon, author of *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York, 1955), has written recently, "historians of socialism have dwelt at some length upon bickering and conflict within the movement." Shannon adds intelligently: "These 'internal' histories of American socialism are often valuable for what they tell us about other things, but they fail to explain why socialism was never more successful in the United States than it has been."⁴

Just as one strain in Socialist historiography has emphasized the movement's inner turmoil and dispute, another (more recent in vintage) has treated the movement—even in its "golden years"—as irrelevant to the mainstream of the national experience in the Progressive Era. Vigorously disputing so deterministic an emphasis, Canadian historian Kenneth McNaught has concluded:

American socialism in much of the recent writing becomes a monolithic concept with a fixed life of its own, a conceptual entity whose life was determined not by cumulative individual decisions but by the ghostly immanence of a host of socio-economic abstractions. Jeffersonian ideals, American dreams, Lockean underpinnings, and Algerian dictated that socialism could be in but not of American history.⁵

So different in their perspectives, McNaught and Shannon nevertheless help focus attention on a proper conception of the significance of the *Review* in its time and as a lasting historical source. The *Review* is more than a relic of an irrelevant past or a nostalgic reminder of the vitality of a submerged, neglected, and quarrelsome radical tradition. It is an exceedingly useful historical record for those social historians concerned with understanding the successes and failures of American radicalism, the causes and consequences of American reform, the economic and social condition of American society before 1917, and the patterns of protest and acquiescence characteristic of a developed but imbalanced capitalist society.

American socialism and the *International Socialist Review* thrived together in a particular era. By 1894, the United States had completed its major phase of

industrialization. In that year, the nation stood as first in the world in its productive capacity—far ahead of Great Britain, France, and Germany. And for the next quarter of a century, the United States entered a new phase of development, a time that marked the end of an old era and the start of a new one. Industrial power became centralized and rationalized; craft unionism was stabilized; bureaucracy became more characteristic of social organization; overseas expansion concerned politicians and businessmen; reform movements of a mature industrial society were felt on the local, state, and national level. Organization, centralization, and reform (both elitist and populist patterns of reform) characterized the entire era. So did profound social changes. The communications revolution flattened regional differences and saw the spread of modern "mass" culture. At the same time, the nation's population underwent profound ethnic changes that resulted from the massive migration of southern and eastern Europeans to the United States as well as the beginning spread of southern American Negroes to the north and west of the nation. Much in America changed in these years. Much of what is now called "modern" saw its roots in that time. And the *Review* lived through these changes—reflecting them and commenting on them in its own ways.

Careful study of the *Review* in the perspective of these and other significant changes should permit us to reexamine much that was relevant to the America of that time. If studied afresh, it might suggest new ways to examine more than the roots of Socialist disintegration in the war and postwar years. A modern examination of the contemporary Socialist critiques of progressive reform and corporate innovation, for example, is long overdue. More needs to be known about the reasons socialism appealed to so many of the young intellectuals in that era of reform. The relative success of the Socialists in such pre-war craft unions as the machinists, the coal and metal miners, the brewery and quarry workers, and the men's and women's clothing industries needs further careful and comparative examination. The fact that the foreign-born grew more dominant in the Socialist movement after 1912 is noted by many scholars but not yet fully explained. The electoral successes of Socialist candidates have been recorded (in 1910, for example, thirty-three cities had Socialist mayors), but the day-to-day doings of these Socialist office holders have not been systematically examined.

Much else remains to be explored in depth. Most important in many ways is the need for a critical and empirical study of the changing economic and social structure in the pre-war decades. The pages of the *International Socialist Review* are indispensable for such work. The perspective of the men and women who filled its pages allowed them to open doors shut tight to persons of a less radical view. The Socialist perspective was not without its limitations, but it brought a particular view to bear on its contemporary world and that view ("ideology") shed light on what others saw dimly—if at all. Even though the quality of much of its prose seems wooden, and its theory simple and outdated, the *International Socialist Review* is a significant record of its times. It recorded that time from a particular perspective, vented a meaningful and often appropriate outrage and moral dismay, gathered unusual data, and pierced the optimism that saturated the more commonplace rhetoric of that transitional period in American history. We now have all of this before us again.

—Herbert G. Gutman
Rochester, N.Y., 1968

Notes

1. See, for examples of this controversy, James Weinstein, "The Socialist Party: Its Roots and Strengths, 1912-1919," *Studies on the Left*, I (Winter, 1960), 5-27; his "Socialism's Hidden Heritage," *ibid.*, III (Fall, 1963), 88-108; Gerald Friedberg, "The Socialist Party of America, Decline and Fall, 1915-1918"; and Weinstein's rejoinder in *ibid.*, IV (Summer, 1964), 73-98. A useful new treatment of Socialist relations to craft unions in these years is found in John Laslett, "Reflections on the Failure of Socialism in the American Federation of Labor," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, L (March, 1964), 634-651, and Laslett's "Socialism and the American Labor Movement: Some New Reflections," *Labor History*, VIII (Spring, 1967), 136-155.

2. Details on inner history of the *Review* come from Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (New York, 1952), 292-294.*

3. These quotations are printed in Kipnis, *ibid.*, 384, 392-394.

4. David A. Shannon, "Socialism and Labor," in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *The Comparative Approach to American History* (New York, 1968), 238-251.

5. Kenneth McNaught, "American Progressives and the Great Society," *Journal of American History*, LIII (December, 1966), 504-520.

*This important work by Ira Kipnis will be reprinted by Greenwood Press in 1968.

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